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Special Issue: Online Education Under the COVID-19 Pandemic: Its Challenges and Future Prospects II

Service-Learning Without Borders in Times of COVID-19

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Abstract

Service-learning is not just a volunteer activity. It is a new pedagogy in which students survey a society and find an issue. Then, they work together and serve in order to solve the problem. It is unique in that it serves as a bridge between the classroom and society. Before the COVID-19 Pandemic, Japanese students and international students studied together on campus and visited a local elementary school in order to have a cultural exchange. That way, the students were able to help, they thought, making the English learning a more communicative and meaningful tool instead of the competition of cramming grammar rules and vocabulary. Then under the COVID-19, the elementary school could not have any visitors, and it seemed unsustainable. However, we found an unexpected way to visit the children in an elementary school through the video conference software, Zoom. This paper looks back on the process and how such a seemingly quagmire might bring good news. Also, in parallel, the Pandemic accelerated the use of educational technology in Japan far behind in the world.

Keywords: TESOL, Primary School-University Cooperative Education, Global service-learning, Interdisciplinary, Educational Technology, COVID-19 Pandemic

Service-learning without borders in times of COVID-19

There have been many challenges against our lives globally in 2020 due to COVID-19, and it was no exception for education in Japan. In this paper, I will introduce a project that involved different types of students, such as elementary school children and university students in various countries. This is Problem-based Learning, and it is interdisciplinary, involving languages, cross-cultural studies, service-learning, and remote learning. Like almost all schools in the world, due to COVID-19 elementary schools in Japan were first closed and then opened, but not for visitors. We made a plan for the Japanese university students and the international students in their home countries to pay a virtual visit by Zoom to a local elementary school in Japan for language and cultural exchanges. This had never been thought of or thought possible without COVID-19 influences in culturally and technologically and conservative education systems such as Japanese. This venture brought along tremendous educational possibilities along with the issues that need to be addressed, which I will introduce to better prepare ourselves as teachers.

Literature Review

Brief History of Service-learning

Although the words, Service-learning, was not used, it was said that its spirit goes back to 1900 when the educator, John Dewey (1900), claimed that schools should not only teach knowledge but also include citizenship education and foster a “spirit of service”:

When the school introduces and trains each child of society into membership within such a little community, saturating him with the spirit of service, and providing him with the instrument of effective self-direction, we shall have the deepest and best guarantee of a larger society which is worthy, lovely, and harmonious. (p. 44)

Thus, Dewey encouraged others to use their various potentials to make a differ-

ence in their societies, and ever since this has been a fundamental principle of Service-learning to today.

In 1961, President John F. Kennedy established the Peace Corps in order to promote world peace and friendship. Young men and women went abroad to serve the peoples of the world for their basic needs and to promote a better understanding between the American people and the peoples served. Then, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared a “war on poverty” and signed the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, resulting in making Volunteers In Service To America (VISTA). These organizations created huge momentum in the society in which Christianity played a significant role.

However, in the 1980s there was strong criticism in the United States against the “me generation” that placed priority on themselves to others. Presidents of colleges and universities thought it was their role as an educator to change the situation and formed a coalition called Campus Compact in 1985. It started with 500 university members and then eventually increased to 1,100 educational institutions, more than a third of all higher education in the United States. Campus Compact (1999) funded grants and workshops to support colleges interested in building service-learning into their institutions.

By then the definition of service-learning was established as teaching pedagogy. Eyler and Giles (1999) stated as follows:

Service-learning is a form of experiential education in which learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection, not simply through being able to recount what has been learned through reading and lecture. Service-learning offers students the opportunity to experience the type of learning where they can work with others through a process of acting and reflecting to achieve real objectives for the community and deeper understanding and skills for themselves.

This idea was supported by a constructivist framework. Constructivism seeks to understand how participants construct meanings and actions (Charmaz, 2000)

and recognizes that knowledge is constructed through the interaction among individuals and their social contexts (Crotty, 1998).

Yet another important factor was to be added by Kendall: “All parties in service-learning are learners and help determine what is to be learned. Both the server and those served teach, and both learn.” (1990, p. 22) With this, we came to today’s definition of service-service learning as it was defined by Jacoby (1996):

Service-learning is a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development. Reflection and reciprocity are key concepts of service-learning. (p. 5)

One has to learn, experience, and reflect in service-learning, and that experience should be shared and reciprocal.

This pedagogy, service-learning, can be applied in every discipline and is capable of incorporating very different contents. It provides only the methodological framework that links formal learning with project-based citizenship education. (Rauschert & Byram, 2018) Also, an “intercultural service-learning project is a specific vehicle for bringing together two or more groups of young people from different ethnic, cultural, or social backgrounds to learn about each other’s views and experiences while serving the community.” (YSA, 2007, p. 3).

Service-learning Cycle

Service Learning is a new pedagogical approach that bridges social issues researched in the classroom and the service required for such a solution in the real society. Following the cycle mentioned by Eyler and Giles (1999), there had been many kinds of cycles that were formed and tested. For my class I made a service-learning cycle (Figures 1 and 2) in which all participants served and were served in order to learn and improve their communities.

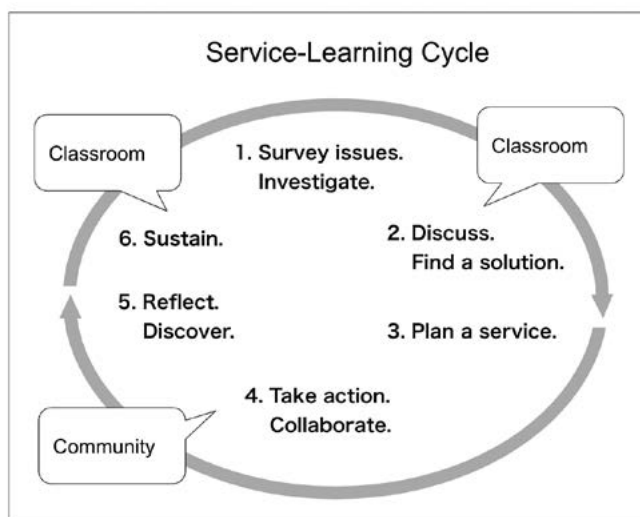


Figure 1 *Service-learning cycle*

I placed emphasis on providing students with the opportunities to speak their target language, to be aware of cross-cultures, and to collaborate with each other. During the service-learning process, I hoped the students would come to learn more deeply about other students, other societies, and themselves.

Service-Learning before the COVID-19

As shown in the Service-learning cycle above, students were asked to investigate child poverty and the new English classes in elementary schools in Japan. For example, in groups students discussed how they learned English and the pros and cons of their English education system. Japanese students pointed out that in Japan more emphasis was placed on grammar and translation than on real communication due to the huge focus on examinations of such skills. As a result, more students became less interested and capable of communication in English than those in other countries (MEXT 2005). Naturally, international students came up with the idea to visit the local elementary school in person

and to introduce their countries in English, using a big, printed poster. The local elementary school agreed to have us during their English classes. We hoped that elementary school children would become interested in using English and knowing more about other cultures.

So far, most of the discussion and preparation was done in person in the classroom while we occasionally used online presentation software, Google Slides, and the online forum, Moodle in addition. During the visit, some international students made poster presentations in Japanese while others did so in English, followed by Japanese interpreting by Japanese university students. Afterward, children asked questions in English or Japanese to the international students. In general, the international students were at first very nervous, but they relaxed gradually with the children's honest, unexpected, and funny questions.

Service-learning under the COVID-19

As soon as the COVID-19 Pandemic hit Japan, the government issued an official request to all universities in Japan to go online. Although Japanese universities were not far behind in educational technology in the world, few universities had the technological skills or resources to teach classes entirely online or to teach hybrid courses. Fortunately, I have been teaching online using educational technologies such as Moodle and G Suite for Education, now called Google Workspace for Education. Since most countries in the world banned traveling to a foreign country, I thought I would not have international students and thus could not teach service-learning classes. When I found that several international students were taking the class, I thought that they were able to enroll because they did not leave Japan. However, I was surprised to find that they were taking the class from their home countries at 11:00 pm or 4:00 am local time. Thus, the immediate challenges posed by the COVID-19 were distance separated by land and oceans and time difference. Initially, it seemed impossible to do any volunteering, but from the discussion with the students came an idea of virtual

visit to an elementary school using Zoom video conferencing software.

Once we knew that we would use Zoom, we just followed the cycle “Before the COVID-19” above. Instead of everything we were doing in person, we needed to do them online. See Figure 2. We made use of G Suite, Moodle, and Zoom for these purposes. Our students chose to visit a local elementary school and to make a presentation for their countries in English and Japanese, but this time online. It was to demonstrate how enjoyable and useful to learn languages and cultures. Japanese students participated by Zoom from home in Japan while the international students participated by Zoom from their countries in France, the United Kingdom, and Russia. The elementary school children welcomed the university students, and I organized the event and worked on the technical setup in the classroom, such as the camera, speaker, computer, and projector. More specific descriptions for planning and a virtual visit are to follow below.

Service-learning Cycle	Activities
1. Survey issues Research problems in society and find the issue that interests you.	1. Language education Japanese Government starting English education in elementary schools.
→ 2. Discuss. Find a solution. Discuss and find a solution in class.	→ 2. Memorizing grammar is not the best way to learn. Use English/Japanese for cultural exchange.
→ 3. Plan a service. Plan a volunteer activity in the community.	→ 3. Plan a (virtual) visit to a local elementary school in Japan.
→ 4. Take action. Collaborate. Execute the plan with classmates and the community.	→ 4. Visit classes, present, question, and answer. Exchange languages and cultures.
→ 5. Reflect. Discover. Look back and share the findings.	→ 5. Reflect. Read feedback from children. Discuss.
→ 6. Sustain. Continue to support.	→ 6. Watch the video, read the reflection, and improve the next project.

Figure 2 *Service-learning cycle and activities*

Participants

Every semester there were 30 university students, 10 Japanese and 20 international students, enrolled in the class before the COVID-19. However, there were about only ten Japanese students and four international students per semester because of the Pandemic last year. Japanese students were mostly intermediate to advanced speakers of English with some study experience overseas. As a matter of fact, some of them were forced to come back to Japan in the middle of their scheduled study, such as in the United States because of the COVID-19 outbreak. Then, there were four international students each semester who took the class in addition to the Japanese language classes from their home countries. As the Japanese students, these international students were originally to come to Japan in order to enroll in the exchange program to study the Japanese language and culture, but they were not allowed to leave their countries to come to Japan due to the COVID-19. The course Service Learning across Cultures is part of the program and offers real opportunities to use English and Japanese to communicate among the Japanese students and the international students for the volunteer project at an elementary school.

The third group of participants was the fourth and fifth-grade children in the local elementary school. They started taking English lessons once a week at school for the first time in school. Since 2020, English has been mandatory, starting in the third grade. Thus, their English level was very elementary, but they seemed genuinely excited to have the international guests in class online. We started the volunteer visit, physical one, to the elementary school several years ago when a vice principal agreed to our proposal. There were two to three classes of 30 boys and girls each.

Finally, I am the author of this study and the organizing teacher. I am a native speaker of Japanese, and I am fluent in English with some experience of teaching classes in English at American universities.

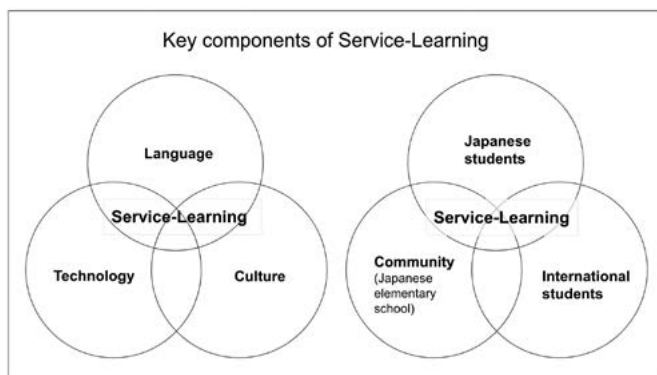


Figure 3 *Key components of service-learning*

Issues and Challenges by Participants

It seemed an impossible task. A language is a communication tool. How can you communicate with someone when that person is not physically present due to the time difference and distance? An emergency brings many risks, but sometimes it also brings huge energy to break the big wall in education. Here first I will introduce issues and challenges before the COVID-19 from the perspective of each participant.

Common issues and challenges

First, I would like to introduce common issues for all participants of the activity. Since the current situation had been brought about by the COVID-19 Pandemic, it may be appropriate to characterize them with the word fear, fear of using a new language, fear of not behaving right in a different culture, fear of using new communication technology, and finally the fear of endangering others and oneself with the virus.

To begin with, there is a fear that you may not be able to communicate with others, the international students, the Japanese students, and the Japanese children, using English or Japanese. Japanese students are especially known to

be afraid of making grammatical mistakes in English. Another fear is that you may make a faux pas, embarrassing oneself, in one of the politest cultures. For instance, once they watch the Japanese tea ceremony, the international students may expect step-by-step protocols in everything in the classroom.

Then, there is fear of using new technology for communication. Until the COVID-19 outbreak, few people were familiar with using video conferencing software such as Zoom. It is a fear that you may not be able to join a video meeting without proper knowledge. Even if you did, you may be disengaged from a meeting in the next moment or realize after half an hour of talk that you had been mute all that time.

Finally, you fear even if you take every precaution, you may endanger yourself and even others including children. If you stand in front of many students in a crowded classroom, you are vulnerable to the virus. What if you were infected? What if you had more vulnerable family members living with you? The last fear is particularly significant, and it interrupts education in the world.

Issues and challenges for the Japanese university students

There were about ten Japanese university students each semester who took the class. Among them, the majority were junior to senior-year Japanese university students and were intermediate to advanced speakers of English with some study experience overseas. As a matter of fact, a few of them were forced to come back to Japan due to the COVID-19 outbreak in the middle of their study abroad program. They were highly motivated to speak English and not shy to communicate with the other international students. When I asked why they took the course, they wrote that they wanted to keep the English fluency they earned while studying abroad.

In these visits, the Japanese students were to have mainly two roles, to make a presentation as a role model for the elementary school children and to act as an interpreter for the international students who spoke in English. Some

international students could make a presentation all in Japanese while others could speak only basic Japanese phrases. Interpreting is to listen to a language, understand it, and repeat the content in another language, in a very short time. So, interpreting requires a new set of skills, and this time it is even more challenging because there is a slight time gap and because the voice cannot be heard clearly due to the long distance between the video cameras.

The next role of the Japanese university was to make a presentation as a role model in English for the children online. I instructed them to use English mainly but to supplement it with the use of some Japanese so that the children would not be completely lost in English. The topics would have to be about things Japanese that they know yet find interesting. Also, the Japanese university students would have to learn how to make a presentation using Google Slides, an online presentation tool similar to PowerPoint.

Another characteristic of these students was that they were open-minded about volunteering and had some experience with it. So, they were eager to work for the volunteer project. Being upper-year university students in Japan means that they must engage in job-hunting, yet they will have to spend more time on this project than regular classes. I also expected that they would have opportunities to look back on their language learning experiences in primary school days and compare between the current curriculum and their curriculum from the perspectives of the international students.

Issues and challenges for the international students

Before the COVID-19, there were 20 international students signed up for the service-learning class every semester, but in 2020 there were only two to four international students who were enrolled in the service-learning class. Like the Japanese students, these international students were originally to come to Japan in order to enroll in the exchange program to study the Japanese language and culture, but because of the COVID-19, they were not allowed to leave their

countries to come to Japan. So, they were taking the class from their home countries such as the UK, France, the US, and Russia. I did not know the fact until a few weeks into the semester. It was part of the confusion created by the Pandemic. The university failed to inform the instructor.

At our university, there are two programs for international students, the Japanese Language Course (JLC) and the Global Japan Studies Course (GJSC). While JLC offers intensive Japanese language classes at different levels, GJSC offers content courses focusing on Japanese culture and the advanced fields in Japan. The main language used for the Japanese Language Course is Japanese while English is the main for Global Japan Studies.

The course “Service Learning across Cultures” is part of the Global Japan Studies program, so the levels of students’ Japanese proficiency vary. Some international students speak Japanese fluently and make a presentation in Japanese on his or her own, while other international students can do so only in English and need help with Japanese from the Japanese students. For the students of both programs, the service-learning project such as a visit to an elementary school offers real opportunities to speak languages and experience the Japanese culture first-hand.

It is important to note that both JLC and GJSC students signed up for the service-learning class to the maximum enrollment capacity almost every semester until the year of the Pandemic. While service-learning is a new pedagogy not well-known in Japan, it is well-established in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, where it is integrated into the school curriculum (Education Commission of the States 2014). Thus, many of them already have some experience of volunteering. They already learned that service-learning was important not only for the community but for themselves. In working in the community, they will have opportunities to speak Japanese and learn about society. Also, some of the international students are interested in pursuing a career such as teaching in Japan later, and they think some actual

experience of working with Japanese people in the community will add to their qualifications.

As I mentioned, there are mainly two kinds of fear or challenges for international students. The first one is that you may not behave properly and embarrass yourself in a society with a long history and tradition. For example, an average Japanese student would know what to call his or her teacher, not to eat in class, or whether to wear the shoes inside the school, but that is not always the case for international students.

Thanks to the new technology, international students could overcome the challenge of long distance. They could not leave their countries due to the COVID-19, but they could attend the class, using Zoom. Still, some of them needed to adapt to the new time zone. When the class started at 1:00 pm in Japan, it was 5:00 am in London, 7:00 am in Saint Petersburg, Russia, and 12:00 am in Toronto Canada. Needless to say, it would be difficult to attend the class at 4:00 am and 1:00 am every day. It was amazing that all the international students made it without being late while some Japanese students were late to the class.

Issues and challenges for the elementary school students

The third group of students is the fourth and fifth-grade children in the local elementary school. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) is the governmental agency that makes major decisions for education in Japan. It decided to integrate English as a subject at elementary schools from 2018 as an experiment and officially from 2020 (MEXT, 2014). Thus, many of the elementary school children had started learning English for the first time in school recently, and their English level was very basic.

When I started visiting the local elementary schools recently, I noticed that children were becoming more racially diverse. For example, there were more children of immigrant workers from countries such as Brazil, Peru, and the Philippines in this prefecture Aichi (MEXT, 2021). Since English is one of the

official languages, children of immigrants from such countries are likely to speak English more fluently than others. It might help these children to earn respect from other Japanese children by speaking good English with the university students since the children of immigrants may look different and thus susceptible to bullying.

Another recent change might be that more Japanese parents are sending their elementary school children to take English lessons to prepare for the entrance examinations for junior, senior high school, and university. Since not all parents can afford it, it leads to an academic gap at an early age. By the fourth grade, some children might have had some years of English lessons while others might have had none.

Similar to the academic gap, there is another gap that should not be ignored. It is a digital gap at home. 87% of Japanese elementary school children aged 9–10 years old have Internet access at home (Japan Cabinet Office, 2020), but almost 13% do not. That is, one out of ten children does not have Internet access. We were not sure how these children with different backgrounds might respond to our visit.

In the bigger picture, the digital gap at school between OECD countries seems as wide. According to the OECD report (Ikeda, 2020), 9 out of 10 students in Singapore and Denmark are enrolled in schools that have an effective online learning support platform, whereas in Argentina, Costa Rica, Kosovo, Panama, and Japan it is less than 30%. That is why the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology started the GIGA School Program (MEXT 2020) in order to ensure one device for each student with a high-speed network in schools. The original plan was to be completed by the later year but was accelerated to finish by 2021 due to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Issues and challenges for the elementary school teachers

In Japan to be a teacher in elementary school, one has to teach all subjects

including math, music, science, Japanese, and social studies by him or herself. In addition, they have to be responsible and accountable for each child's academic work, health, and much more to the parents and the family members of the children. So far, there had been no teacher training required to teach English, nor had they time to receive one. The same was true for using educational technology. Japanese elementary school teachers do not receive such training. Since they are already too busy, it might be difficult for the elementary school teachers to meet and discuss with us about extracurricular activities such as a virtual visit.

For the same reason, the elementary school teachers are too busy to spend time learning how to integrate educational technology into teaching. Even if they wish, according to the OECD report, Japanese teachers have access to the least resource regarding the use of technology in all OECD countries. (Ikeda, 2020) This is certainly a challenge for elementary school teachers.

There is a fear that other elementary school teachers may not understand the significance of the activity, such as a virtual visit, possibly regarding it as an interruption to their teaching. Also, an elementary school teacher may need to get approval from the guardians to attend the special class and to take part in the video conference. In general, elementary school teachers in Japan are already under a lot of pressure to be accountable for the well-being of their students, and they are too busy.

Issues and challenges for the organizing teacher

When I started teaching a service-learning class initially, I gave a class questionnaire, and there were three groups of students with different interests and goals as I described above. It was the first challenge as a teacher to teach the class for three groups with very different backgrounds and needs. The Japanese students wished to speak English and make friends with the international students while studying the subject. The second is the international students who wanted to study the Japanese language first and then its culture while participating in

volunteer activities. The third group is also international students who are not as interested in the language but wish to know more about Japanese society. So, I made it clear in the syllabus that the class would be conducted in English and Japanese with a ratio of 80% to 20%. I would explain in English most of the time and give additional explanations in Japanese for the beginning-to-intermediate Japanese students. I would also talk to the students of the second group in Japanese on an individual basis as much as possible in order to help them improve their Japanese.

Another challenge for the organizing teacher is making clear the definition of service-learning and its role in relation to the academic content to everyone. Sometimes I suspect students regard a service-learning class as just a volunteer class and not as an academic class. So, it is important to remind students that service is a bridge between the knowledge learned in the classroom and the real community and that critical reflection helps to gain a deep understanding of the community and self. So, the balance between the research in the classroom, service in the community, and critical reflection are important. For example, it takes much time to survey the issues and prepare for the service, but I also reminded the students to pay attention to how the children were reacting or how they felt in the service so that they could write good reflection comments later.

Sharing the overall picture with everyone and giving precise instructions at the right time are huge challenges for the organizing teacher. Before the COVID-19, it was easy to tell the students. I could just give a verbal instruction, but when participants are separated by oceans and on the different sides of the screen, your voice would not reach directly. For example, if a presenter presses the mute button in Zoom and keeps on talking without realizing it, we lose a few minutes and the listeners' attention. Having a detailed good plan and giving constant feedback for good communication help.

The big challenge for the organizing teacher is not being able to receive technical support from the university or the elementary school. Due to the

COVID-19 Pandemic, elementary schools would allow only very few guests to enter the premises, so my student helper and I could go to the classrooms to set up for the video meeting. In addition to a regular video meeting setup for one person, we would have to set up the equipment such as a camera, a computer, a microphone, speaker, and the projector for the children in the classroom. It was especially difficult to configure the audio so that the children and the students in different locations could hear each other without noise or echo.

If things go well, the organizing teacher will need to give the assessment to the students. What would be the percentage of the classroom work, quiz results, and paper against the service, leadership, cooperation, and reflection outside the classroom? How do you observe and evaluate them when you are so concentrating on orchestrating the whole event? It would be important to have rubrics for various stages and to keep students informed beforehand.

These are not all, and how much time should or could the teacher spend on one class? It is incredibly time-consuming, so a teacher should be happy to get started with the project and hope to improve step by step. After all, there is no shortcut to good learning and teaching.

Reflections under the COVID-19 by Participants

After the visit, the university students discussed how they felt, what they found, and what they could do next in class and in the forum posts. The elementary school children gave feedback on the virtual visit on a piece of paper. The following reflections were based on these reflections and the feedback, but some analysis and comments are mine.

Reflections for the Japanese university students

In general, it went well with Japanese students. They said they enjoyed working with the international students, using English. Some of them found it difficult to hear English by non-native speakers of English such as from France

or Russia, but it was a good experience for them to hear non-native speakers' English than their own. Another challenge for them was to act as an interpreter for the children. They listened to the English of the international students and took turns interpreting it into Japanese. It seemed difficult at first, but I gave chances to practice in groups in Zoom Breakout room. Discussion and practice in groups like this helped them improve their interpreting skills and build good teamwork. So, the presentation went very well, and there were many good questions from outspoken children, which I will list below in the children's section.

Another fear was the use of new technology. One of the university students was nervous because she was afraid that she might have a bad internet connection and could not do well during the visit. Some of them wrote in the reflection comments in the Moodle forum, "I felt anxious sometimes when I interpreted because I couldn't see how the listeners reacted" and "It was difficult not seeing children's faces when I was interpreting as I could have changed some of my words depending on their reactions." Thus, another one analyzed that "my anxiety may have appeared" on her face, but immediately others suggested the solution in other posts, "I saw you smiling while interpreting. I think that was especially important when giving speeches to children. Great job!" Another observed that "You were always smiling and it made students easy to ask questions when the presentation finished." These peer encouragements facilitate volunteering (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996) and lead to more autonomous and effective service-learning.

There is some other evidence of peer learning, learning from each other. A Japanese student thought "Your interpret was so great because it was easy to understand and correctly. So, I would like to improve my interpreting skills like you." Still, another was surprised "it was your first time interpreting. You were very calm during the presentation. I think you were interpreting using simple words for the children and that was amazing. I learned a lot from you!" Of course, peer learning is not limited to among Japanese students. This is not

directly related to the visit, but one Japanese student commented on COVID-19 in Russia, “There are some cultural differences between Japan and Russia. For example, the Japanese tend to do the same things as others, so it makes everyone wear masks in public with no mandatory rules from the Japanese government.” The student from Russia responded, “You are absolutely right, Russian people are a bit careless when it comes to taking precautions against the virus, and it has bad consequences.”

Overall, although the Japanese students were nervous and scared before the visit, they were glad to see children’s happy faces and thought that it was an “enjoyable,” “amazing,” and “precious” opportunity. They learned much from the children and collaborated with the Japanese and the international classmates outside the classroom to better the society and selves.

I suspected that the class might demand more time and work from the junior and senior Japanese university students than they hoped, and there might be some dropouts. However, there were none toward the end of the semester.

A few Japanese students made a presentation about Japan. One might ask why we have Japanese presenters speaking in English when we have native or fluent speakers of English. But they served as very good role models for children. Actually, the children were impressed by the presentation. For example, one of them wrote in the feedback later, “I was impressed by Ai-san’s (the Japanese speaker) fluent English. She was cool. I want to be like her.” Another one wrote, “Like her (the Japanese speaker), I want to introduce traditional Japanese culture (to the foreign people) such as Japanese festivals.”

Due to the COVID-19, the Japanese students could not visit an elementary school in person and compare the differences from their own experience when they were younger, but they were very surprised by the energy of elementary school children and felt the virtual visit was worthwhile.

Reflections for the international university students

Japanese students were not the only ones who were nervous about talking in front of children. A student from the UK said, “this was a little bit scary even if the audience was only elementary school children. I think that doing this task helped me to become a bit more confident in myself and my ability to do public presentations.” Other international students agreed that “I feel a lot better about doing this sort of task in the future.”

Speaking of language, the international students with advanced Japanese proficiency did well, and those with limited Japanese skills did also well, thanks to the help of Japanese interpreters. According to their reflection, the international students were expecting the Japanese children to be very shy and quiet, but they were surprised to find otherwise. Japanese children were nothing but shy. They were “energetic,” “cheerful,” and “funny” according to the international students.

In their presentations, the international students introduced themselves, their families, their hometown, and their home countries. Some gave a mini lesson on their native languages such as Russian and French. For example, they taught children how to say “Hello” and “See you” in Russian, which was somewhat awkward over the computer screen, but the children all seemed to have enjoyed it.

In addition to the topics about themselves, the international students spoke about why they came to Japan and what they liked about Japan most. The Japanese children were very excited and responded loudly when the international students said they loved ramen and that “One Piece” and “Pokemon” were very popular among the children in their countries. However, later one of the students from France reflected as follows, “I was surprised that some of them knew such violent Manga as Tokyo Goule,” of which topics include cannibalism. He thought such violent manga would not be allowed to read in the majority of Western countries. (Napier, 2001)

Although the international students from different countries agreed that children were “energetic” and “funny” no matter which countries, they agreed that the Japanese children were much more disciplined than those in their countries. A French student said, “French teachers would listen to the question before children ask them to the presenters, to avoid vulgar or joke questions, but it wasn’t necessary for Japanese children.” A student from the UK agreed, “There are similarities between British and Japanese kids, such as being very hyperactive and curious, but British children can get very rowdy very quickly and it becomes extremely difficult to get them to behave.” It may be stereotyping, but it seems convincing to some and to be researched in the future.

Regarding the technology, one of the international students was surprised to find that “Japan was unwilling to adapt to a virtual learning environment, because to me Japan is a very early adopter of technological advances.” He said this when heard from a Japanese university student that the Japanese children in elementary and junior high schools could not have online classes because of the shortage of computers in each school. As I wrote above, that is why the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) accelerated the GIGA School Program in order to ensure sustainable education under the COVID-19 Pandemic. Once the program is implemented, each child will have a device such as a tablet or ChromeBook and can go to online classes at school or at home.

Again, about the role of the international students and the use of languages, the comments by the international students made me think again. The student from the UK said, “I spoke entirely in English, as this was my role as the native English speaker.” Since the English student was a student of the Global Japan Studies Course (GJSC), the main language was English, so he had no problem making the presentation in English. However, the student from Russia said, “I would like to try myself both as a presenter and as an interpreter, and also to give Japanese students a chance to present their own projects, as their slides are

amazing as well.” From the elementary school students’ viewpoint, it would be better if more guest speakers spoke in English because the children are studying English when we visit them. The Russian student was a student of the Japanese Language Course (JLC) and taking the service-learning class, so given the choices, she would naturally prefer to make a presentation all in Japanese. Also, she knew that the Japanese university students would love to make a presentation in English as well as to interpret from English into Japanese. However, it was not possible to accommodate everyone’s wishes because the time at the elementary school was very limited, only 45 minutes at a time. I will discuss the issue of the roles in the discussion section below.

Finally, the international students also said that the virtual visit was too short and that they wanted to spend more time with children. I was surprised when the Russian student made a suggestion at the end of the course. She said that she would like to organize a similar virtual visit to a Russian elementary school when she went back, so she would like others to join her. She asked for the contact information of those who were interested. This is ideal for global educational sustainability and fits the cycle of service-learning.

Reflections for the elementary school students

Akaike elementary school is a relatively new, middle-sized school located in a small city. Many of the fourth and fifth graders that we visited started learning English officially recently prior to our visit. I arrived at the classroom and started setting up the equipment for the video meeting during the recess, several children surrounded me out of curiosity and started talking to me in English. They asked me with a smile on their faces, “How are you? What is your name? Do you like soccer? Do you like curry rice?” They were basic phrases, but they were spontaneous, appropriate, and communicative. Most of all, they were enjoying the English conversation. According to the survey by MEXT (2021), 74% of the fifth-grade elementary school students in Japan liked to learn English, and

among them, 43% liked it because they could talk to foreign teachers and foreign students. The first reason was to sing English songs and play games.

In the classroom, I set up the computer, the projector, and the screen in the front of the classroom. The screen size was 100 inches, so it was big enough for 30 children. However, some children had a problem with the audio. They said that one of the presenter's English was too small. They did not have problems with other speakers.

As the international students mentioned already, the Japanese children were quiet and attentive during the presentations. When they were asked if they had any questions after the presentations, the majority of the children's hands were raised. The questions were simple and mainly related to the presentations such as "What is your favorite Japanese food besides sushi?" and "Do you know *Kimetsu-no Yaiba*, *Demon Slayer*?" These questions and their answers were translated by the Japanese university students into English or Japanese.

After the visit, the children answered the questionnaire in Japanese that we prepared. I would like to highlight some of the feedback along with the questions. They were mainly about the language, cultures, and race. Asked what impressed them most about the presentations, many Japanese children said they were surprised by the fluency of the Japanese by the international students. One of them wrote in English, "Very enjoy. English and Japanese is very good." She probably meant she enjoyed the talks very much. The presenters' English and Japanese were very good. Another child noticed, "He often tried to use some Japanese. He must have studied Japanese hard. I enjoyed his speech." Still, another showed an interest in learning Russian after repeating some Russian words in the presentation, "I liked Russian anime and language. I thought Russian writing was complex and interesting."

Next to the language were cultures. When they were asked what impressed them the most, the Japanese elementary school students listed the popularity of Japanese anime. They were surprised and happy to hear that their favorite anime

such as Pokemon and One Piece were as popular overseas as in Japan.

The last issue for the Japanese elementary school students was race although it was not directly mentioned in the feedback. One of the international students was from France, and he said he had a French father and a Japanese mother. His presentation slides were mainly in English, but he spoke very good Japanese in the presentation. In one of the slides, he wrote, “I am ‘Haafu,’” and he means that he was half Japanese and half French. The slide was intriguing in that it had a picture of a lion (father), a picture of a seal (mother), and a picture of a mixed animal with a head of a lion and the body of the seal (the student himself). It is not rare in Japanese schools that anybody with a different appearance or a cultural background is susceptible to bullying. Since there is an increasing number of children with a different ethnical background in Aichi Prefecture where Akaike elementary school was located (MEXT, 2021), the topic of “Haafu” could have a positive or negative impact on the children. My students found later that Aichi Prefecture had the biggest number of children whose native language was not Japanese. For example, their mother tongue is often Filipino, Chinese, Portuguese, Chinese, and English (p. 5, MEXT, 2021). Fortunately, one of the children wrote about it, “I don’t know, but I adore ‘halfa.”” Thus, bringing a group of international students to the classroom helps the children become aware of diversity in race in a positive way.

Finally, it would be safe to say that the virtual visits help. It helps the children realize that it is fun to know about people and places outside Japan and that it is probably even better to visit and see them in their own eyes. It helps the children look at other cultures and their own from different perspectives. They would then realize that their favorite cultures are popular and are worth introducing to the world. And how could they do that? Without using languages and technology, it would be very difficult.

Reflections for the elementary school teachers

The biggest issue for the elementary school teachers was the lack of time. They had just started teaching a new subject, English. Then their class time was cut short by the COVID-19 Pandemic all of a sudden. They must have been concerned that they would not be able to keep up with the national standard curriculum by MEXT, which specifies the minimum number of units per semester to cover. In addition, they had to prepare to use the educational technology in accordance with the government's GIGA School Program. It must have been difficult to make time for the visit and ask other English teachers to cooperate for the virtual visit.

However, the main teacher, acting principal, said, "This virtual visit is a tremendous opportunity. All the children were looking forward to the visit. Children were always curious to learn new languages and cultures," and he continued, "The opportunities like this make it clear why they are studying English and how enjoyable it can be to speak English." Even more insightful comment to me was "There is already a big gap of English proficiency among children in the classroom, but with this virtual visit everyone can enjoy English and different cultures." This is a comment that only seasoned teachers with insight can make.

Reflections for the organizing teacher

In the issues and challenges for the organizing teacher, I wrote that I tried to be considerate for each student's language skill level and needs. For example, I make it a rule to speak in English to Japanese students and in Japanese to international students. But sometimes there is a conflict of priorities because people have different needs. For example, the Russian student previously mentioned above came to Japan to study Japanese, but she chose to make a presentation in English because of two reasons. First, she thought it was her role to speak in English because the elementary school children were studying English. Second, she also wished to give the Japanese university students an opportunity to

contribute to the service-learning as an interpreter, which helped the Japanese students improve their English proficiency. I wish I could have had time to allow more international and Japanese students to present in their preferred language. Similarly, in the past service-learning activities, I sometimes had to ask international students to speak in English rather than Japanese because their Japanese proficiency was not always communicative.

This consideration of the Russian student relates to “reciprocity,” a very important requirement of service-learning. The “server” and the “being served” are all learners and help determine what is to be learned. Those being served sometimes control the service provided. It is this reciprocity that defines the roles and creates a sense of mutual responsibility and respect between the members of the service-learning. (Kendall, 1990)

Another issue was time management. Service-learning takes time for everybody involved, especially for the organizing teacher. It makes sense because in addition to the individual duty in the project, I need to coordinate the server and the served. Especially in times of COVID-19, it is more difficult to contact people online. Also, as I described earlier, I did not receive any technical help from others including the university. It is important to acquire the technical skills to secure the stable audio and video in a video meeting for the server and the served. It would be more sustainable for this kind of service-learning if the organizing teacher were familiar with this to some extent if not completely. I have been teaching myself educational technology instead of relying on others, and it helps in the long run.

Technical help and financial support from the university would be very helpful, but first I would like the university or the academia in Japan to give recognition to the importance of service-learning. Currently, publishing papers help the university teachers most to receive recognition and get promoted while taking the initiative in organizing service-learning does not. I hope that the university realizes that one of its biggest missions is to serve the community,

local or “glocal” and that it takes more than teachers or more than a university.

Conclusion

So far, we have looked at individual participating groups from their perspectives on learning before and after the COVID-19 Pandemics. We have looked at current issues for each and the impact, no matter how small, a virtual visit had on them. The participants sometimes seemed accidental, but looking back, they were all necessary for this service-learning to be successful. They were international students, Japanese students, and Japanese elementary school children, their teachers, and myself. They all had reasons for studying what they were studying. Then, there came COVID-19, which interrupted every aspect of life, including education. Children were asked not to go to school and then to stay home. Japanese university students were prohibited from studying abroad, and international students could not come to Japan. Under these circumstances, it is easy to be pessimistic and to think that the COVID-19 Pandemic destroyed us. It is easy to forget what we are studying for. Teachers were cornered under pressure to take measures in order to make learning sustainable under such circumstances. However, if we put ourselves together and think hard to make education sustainable, there is a way. And a virtual visit was one of the great answers.

Participants helped each other and became the reason to learn. The international students wished to learn Japanese and have an opportunity to speak it. They wished to introduce their countries and themselves to others. Japanese university students helped the international students with the Japanese and by acting as the bridge between the international students and the children. The Japanese students also helped the children by being role models as English speakers. The international students were the reasons for children and the Japanese students to speak English and other languages and to learn about different cultures. Without meeting the international students, what the children learned would be mere knowledge with no meaning. The international students

helped the children look at themselves from a different perspective and take an interest in other languages and cultures.

Having all these participants was not enough to overcome the challenge of the Pandemic and to change Japanese education. Even if we had all these participants together, there was one more thing we needed to achieve educational sustainability, educational technology such as the Learning Management System (LMS), G Suite, and Zoom conference system. Without LMS and G Suite, we could not have a discussion, have a presentation, or post a reflection online. Without Zoom, we could not have an online meeting or a virtual visit to a local elementary school from around the world. These educational technologies helped us connect when we could not connect with each other otherwise.

As an international student stated in the reflection, despite the image of advanced automobiles and robots, Japan lags far behind in the use of educational technology. According to the OECD report (Ikeda, 2020), Japan is 24th in teaching resources. Less than one computer per ten children is available at school for learning, and the teachers have the least time or resource to receive training to use the educational technology. Then came COVID-19 and forced MEXT to accelerate the GIGA School Program to finish distributing a digital device to every student in Japanese elementary schools and junior high schools. The COVID-19 Pandemic also successfully forced almost all universities in Japan to learn to teach remotely. The teachers in higher education need to pass the new skills to the teachers in the elementary and secondary schools.

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